

This experience has encouraged me to explore and invest in similar organizations in Columbus. Several of us who went on the trip have considered expanding the services of one of the local Head Start programs. Even if we don't accomplish something that large, I have a new appreciation for those programs, and would like to start volunteering with them once I have the time and transportation to do so. However, the most significant thing I learned was understanding people's motivations but still responding appropriately to their actions. I can apply this concept not only to other kids, but also to classmates, coworkers, friends, or even strangers. Looking beyond actions to the people who did them will help me be a less judgmental and more compassionate person.



One of the hardest challenges for me was figuring out how to interact with the kids as a new friend but also as an authority figure. Like many 3- and 4-year-olds, the kids liked to test the limits to see what they could get away with, like spraying each other with the water bottles used to water the plants. I tried my best to keep a sense of order while praising when possible and maintaining my friendship with the kids. This was a gradual process that took the entire week, but the teachers helped to explain why they reprimanded when they did based on long-term observations of the kids.

# OPERATION BREAKTHROUGH

For my STEP Signature Project, I traveled with seven other Ohio State students to Kansas City to volunteer at Operation Breakthrough. This organization is an early learning center for low-income families in Kansas City that also offers food, clothing, and therapy/counseling as families need them. Each member of my group was assigned to a classroom, where we helped supervise and play with the kids for most of the day and assisted with other projects during their nap time.



The other most meaningful experience was on our last day, when the volunteer coordinator took us on a walk to see some of the other nearby resources in Kansas City. We heard stories of some of the parents who brought their kids to Operation Breakthrough, like a mother who got her kids ready before 6:30 AM every day so they could catch the bus to school and work. Some of the stories offered a different perspective on common assumptions, like For example, one parent made it a significant priority to clothe her kids well, not because she was too ignorant to put other needs first, but because she feared others would accuse her of neglect. Hearing these personal stories helped me understand the extent to which these parents cared for their kids, fighting for the best for them despite their past experiences and current difficulties.

One of the most meaningful experiences at Operation Breakthrough was talking with the center's behavioral therapist. Early in the week, I sat in on a session the therapist had with the girls in my class. She taught deep breathing exercises and mindfulness through fun scenarios like picking a flower and blowing off the petals. Later, she talked to the entire volunteer group about the challenges she has had with some of the kids. The therapist talked about how the kids often don't always express the reasons behind why they act up and negatively react to each other acting up, which can make classes very challenging to manage when 15 kids have behavioral issues. This experience made me more aware of the emotional needs of the kids, and of kids in general.



**STEP**  
SECOND-YEAR TRANSFORMATIONAL  
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Before this project, I assumed I would gain a better appreciation of the advantages I had growing up, such as plenty of food, a well-furnished house in a large neighborhood, and access to whatever school supplies I needed. What surprised me was the emotional and psychological support that I took for granted. I had never considered the positive implications of stable housing, parents who had the time to help me develop, and a lack of traumatic experiences; similarly, I had not considered the long-lasting negative influence of homelessness or violence on the children I would be interacting with.